DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 906 CS 201 966

AUTHOR Pavat, F. Andre
TITLE The Application of Psychological Knowledge to the Study of Literature for Children and Adolescents.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (64th, New Orleans, November 28-30, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Children; Emotional Response; Junior High School Students; *Literary Analysis; *Literature Appreciation; Psychological Needs; Psychology; *Student Reaction

ABSTRACT

A literature study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement reveale' that as a result of instruction from their teachers, students at the end of junior high are well on their way to narrowing their perceptions of appropriate responses to a literary work to those which can be characterized as formal, analytic, and impersonal. This situation should be corrected so that students achieve a truer view of what the literary experience can be. In order to do this, teachers need to develop a method of literary inquiry directed to the reader's subjective experience with the work as well as to the work itself. And, in doing this, such abstract criteria as adequate theme, lively plot, memorable characters, and distinctive style would be set aside in favor of restoring reader response as a determining factor in the worth of a literary work. (JM)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The Application of Psychological Knowledge to the Study of Literature for Children and Adolescents*

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
F. Andre Favat
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

F. Andre Favat
College of Education, Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts 02115

When the massive literature study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) revealed that in many diverse countries, including the United States, schools do indeed succeed in imparting to students a preferred way of approaching literary works, many of us whose concern is literature for children or adolescents sighed in relief. Whether the approach was formal-analytic, thematic, affective, or historical, the IEA study showed that a student's way of looking at a literary work became more consistent and identifiable as he progressed through school and more congruent with the approach preferred by his curriculum makers and teachers.

It may be the case, however, that our sighs of relief should be replaced by moans of despair, for I would maintain that the approaches to literature with which most of us have generally been identified are hardly ones we ought to be imparting to our students.

American literary inquiry, influenced as it has been by the pseudo-scientism of New Criticism, has long had what may rightly be called an objective orientation. The formal features of a literary work--its symbolic structure, its figurative devices, the relationship of its parts, and so on--have been the stuff of the critics' and academicians' study. Reference to non-objective matters, in particular the reader's subjective experience with the work have usually been

---

*This paper was originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, New Orleans, November, 1974.

eschewed.

The result of this attending to objective features to the exclusion of subjective experience, has been that the reading of literature has come to be viewed as a singularly cognitive event, where the reader is a spectator at an elaborate diversion the author has prepared for him, an observer of narrative events, linguistic play, or philosophical ideas surrounded by a fictive frame, apprehending what is before him with reason and detachment.

But a moment's reflection will show that the reading of literature is much closer to the center of the reader's being than these cognitive approaches would admit. In his Fiction and the Unconscious, Simon Lesser has observed that whatever else man may be, he is an indefatigable seeker of pleasure, and if human experience, with all its apparently inevitable anxieties and discontents, dissatisfactions and disillusionments, does not yield enough satisfaction, then man strives to reduce his discontents and to augment the meager satisfactions he does have by seeking other more harmonious worlds which accord with his desires and to which he can repair, however briefly, for refuge, solace, and pleasure.[2]

These other worlds, of course, can be found in literature, and indeed it is to the reading of literature that man turns to make good some of the deficiencies of life and by which he can satisfy some of his innermost needs, actually incorporating the literary work into his being, participating, combining, and recombining with it in such ways that he frequently emerges from the experience profoundly affected and fundamentally altered.

There is considerable disparity, however, between man's literary experiences and the critics' or academicians' literary inquiries. The most widely used methods of literary study abruptly remove the reader from his literary experience and force him into objective analysis, giving him little opportunity to consider how he himself came into conjunction with the work in terms of his own feelings

and attitudes.

We who work with literature for children or adolescents, moreover, have learned well these standard approaches and have functioned in our own domain with their assumptions and procedures. It is true, of course, that we have made our approaches somewhat less truncated by attempting to relate the book to the child's or the the adolescent's life, but this is only a quick genuflection to what for most of us is an intuitively felt but vaguely perceived understanding that the objective features of the text and the reader's subjective experience of it are inextricably involved and that together they account for the phenomenon of response.

It is very much the case that in our own approaches we favor the orientations found in standard literary inquiry where concern with objective features holds sway over concern for subjective experience and where there is a premium on impersonal deliberation rather than personal application and on dispassionate analysis rather than passionate understanding.

And just as we have learned well from our teachers, so have our students learned well from us. The IEA study, in showing that schools in the United States, when compared to schools in other countries are singularly successful in influencing their students' literary responses, also revealed that by the end of junior high school, students in the United States are well on their way to narrowing their perceptions of what responses to a literary work are appropriate, and along a continuum depicting preferred types of literary response, ranging from personal ones to impersonal ones, our students are tallied as favoring the impersonal ones.[3]

It is ironic indeed that in an area where we do make a difference, that the difference we make is to skew our students' perceptions of what it means to read a book. Like Othello, we have comported ourselves not wisely, but too well, and

it therefore seems incumbent upon us to correct this situation and to enable our students to achieve a truer view of what the literary experience can be.

We must restore our students to the books they read. We must create in them more balanced attitudes toward the literary experience, so that when one of them offers the comment that a certain passage about a house and the fence in front of it reminds him of the still summer afternoons of his boyhood in Marysville, Kansas, when the only sound to be heard came from his slow swinging on the gate of the picket fence which separated his house from the dusty road, his response will be seen as being as fully valid and perhaps ultimately more so than another student's comment that the fence is a symbol of the separation of the household from the rest of society, or another's that the pickets are really phalluses.

In order to bring about this balance it will be necessary for us to develop for ourselves a method of literary inquiry which is more in accord with the nature and function of the literary experience than our present methods are, one which brings together knowledge of the objective features of the text and knowledge of the reader's subjective experience of it.

Such an approach which directs us not merely to the text alone but as well to the perilous realm of the reader's inner life, requires us to make systematic use of scientific psychological knowledge as a literary critical tool. A fertile body of such knowledge exists in developmental and psychoanalytic psychologies, for they offer the most precise and comprehensive theories we have today about the individual's developmental stages and subjective states. As such they can enable us to consider the reader's encounter with the text with the same precision with which through standard literary inquiry we have come to deal with the text alone.

Using such knowledge, we would find that an inquiry into a book such as Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows might proceed as follows: Most readers

identify more with one than with another of the characters in The Wind in the Willows, but most who are honest with themselves will admit to possessing a little of the impulsiveness of Toad, the sternness of Badger, and the practicality of Rat and Mole. Most readers would also admit to their great absorption in the interactions among the characters, as in Badger's merciless lecturing to Toad on his profligate ways or in Toad's shameless behavior in deceiving his friends and escaping from his bedroom; they would also admit to a tremendous sense of well-being when, at the end of the book, all the characters are reunited in good fellowship, thereby bringing order once more to the River Bank.

The reasons for these responses arise from the fact that the characters in The Wind in the Willows are objectifications of the basic components of the human psyche. Toad is in the grips of pleasure-seeking id forces, causing him to satisfy his every wish and whim. Badger is all superego, living by rules, seeking justice and punishment for wrong-doing, and Rat and Mole, those operant egos, are enduringly the mediators between Toad and Badger, enjoying Toad's compelling company, but always trying to keep his behavior within acceptable bounds. As we read, and through the mechanism of identification, each of these characters provides release for one or another of the id, ego, or superego forces in us, and the oppositions among the characters lay bare for us the very oppositions among these forces as they exist in us. When harmony has been restored to the relationships among the characters of the River Bank, when their conflicts have been resolved, so is an intra-psychic harmony restored to us, as the conflicting demands of the component parts of our personalities are brought to resolution. It is this intra-psychic harmony, achieved through the multiple identifications with the characters in the story as they achieve harmony of the River Bank, which releases in us that overwhelming feeling of comfort and reassurance that

comes from reading this book.

The humanness of the animals, of course, supports our identification with the forces that impel them to action, but at the same time to hold an exposition of the psychic tensions that exist within us has the potential for producing great anxiety, for the spectacle of our opposing systems displayed before us, with the attendant possibilities of our finding one or another of these systems more attractive than the others, is threatening indeed. It is the subtle interplay of human and animal characteristics in the anthropomorphic animal, however, which saves us from this anxiety. If we find pleasure in the playing out of our id forces through Toad--Toad the terror, the traffic queller, the motor car snatcher, the prison breaker, the famous, skilled, entirely fearless Toad, handsome Toad, rich Toad, popular Toad, clever Toad, Toad so free and careless and debonair--we are saved from guilt and anxiety not only by the opposing forces of the superego in the form of Badger and the mediating forces of the ego in the form of Rat and Mole, but also by the interplay of the characters' human and animal attributes which reminds us that Toad is after all only a toad, just like the toad that inhabits the nearest pond. By reminding us that these human animals are ultimately animals, this interplay enables us to deny that it is we who are in operation in the pages of the book and thus enables us to proceed in a non-threatening milieu to the gratifications to be found in resolving psychic conflicts.

Importantly, this method of inquiry is not be construed as a symbol hunt through the pages of the book, or as a means to understanding how a book can serve as a lens for viewing the psychic states of its author or as a vehicle for the individual psychotherapy of the reader. Instead, it must be seen as the bringing together of information about the objective features of the text and

information about the reader's subjective experience in an approach which continually asks that question too infrequently asked after objective observation, "So what?" or that question too infrequently asked after subjective encounter, "Why?"

Of greatest significance is the fact that unlike the knowledge gained from standard literary inquiry, the knowledge we achieve from the method of inquiry suggested here is not knowledge for our students. It is not student knowledge, but teacher knowledge, and as such must be used not as a new subject for classroom instruction, but rather as the reservoir of insight which informs our behavior as we approach our students with books.

The first effect of this method of inquiry would be that it would give us the impetus to reassess what it is we expect of our students in their public responses after their private experiences with a book. E. E. Cummings has told us, "since feeling is first/who pays any attention/to the syntax of things/will never wholly kiss you,"[4] and we need to recognize that these words hold not only for love, but as well for the way we talk about literature with children or adolescents.

With the awarenesses and sensitivities that a psychologically oriented method of literary inquiry can produce in us, we would develop ways of helping our students achieve what D. W. Harding in Response to Literature refers to as feeling comprehensions of what they have read, where our questions would first encourage, heretical as it may seem, "That's me" verifications from personal experience, and eventually, dynamic movements from the "me" of personal identification to the "that" of the literary work.[5]

In such a world, for instance, our first or second question to an adolescent about a selection just read, regardless of the warmth of sincerity with which we

asked it, would not be "an anyone tell me what kind of poem this is?" We would ask questions that sough exploration of the affective consequences of the features of a book and not erely cognitive analysis, say, of the disease imagery in Hamlet. And throughot we would create an atmosphere where there was tentative, mutual explorationand not one where the less knowing is tested by the more knowing, the studet criminal under the glaring light in the police room with the sadistic teachr sergeant grilling him for information.

In such a world, mreover, it would not be sufficient for us to encourage a child, after he had rea a book, to engage in myriad trivial activities such as making a poster which dvertises the book, dressing a doll authentically like the characters in the bok, constructing dioramas or shadow boxes to depict the setting of the story, esearching the author's life and writing a biographical sketch which he can thn use on the flaps of the book jacket he makes, constructing mobiles of importat people and animals in the story, participating in a book character parade rom room to room, or pushing his book at his booth at the book fair.

We would be appropriately skeptical about these superficial activities which can be applied indisciminately to any work and which ultimately take the child farther and farther say from the central experience he had with the book. We would focus our efforts on generating activities which were more integrally related to the book andthe child's experience of it, activities that would lead him to deeper undersandings of himself and the work he had just read.

The second effet of such a method of inquiry would be that it would give us a means of accounting for or predicting the responses of children or adolescents to the books w put before them. By drawing upon a reservoir of both literary and psychological knowledge, we would be able to ask and to answer

those questions about the sources of appeal in literature for children or adolescents that have too long gone unasked and unanswered: "What is it about this particular book that would cause students of what age and psychological disposition to respond to it in what ways?" or variously, "What is it about students of this particular age and psychological disposition that would cause them to respond to what books in what ways?"

Answers to these questions would enable us to put ourselves less often in the awkward position of applauding books for children or adolescents which are of the highest literary quality only to find these works simply ignored or resoundingly rejected by our students, the audience for whom they were intended. We would also be able to know, and perhaps to accept with equanimity, the reasons for the tremendous and continuing appeal of books which are villified by the critics but praised by our students.

In the case of The Wind in the Willows, for instance, we would have a means of understanding how Arbuthnot and Sutherland's assessment that it is "a warm book...one of the most reassuring and comforting books in all literature,"[6] is hardly the attitude of most children, who generally find this book boring and unengaging.

The reason for this reaction from children, as psychological inquiry would tell us, is that for children the component parts of the personality are not yet so specifically developed as they are in adults and therefore these component parts do not come so readily into conflict and do not create the tensions, anxieties, and dissatisfactions they do in adults. Thus for the child, whose personality system is not characterized by these particular conflicts and for whom the reducing of the tensions arising from these conflicts is not an issue, the achieving of the harmony described earlier does not have much impact. It is not

therefore the "style" of The Wind in the Willows or its "English customs" or any of the other reasons usually given which account for most children's lack of interest in this book, which by our standard methods of inquiry is judged to be one of the masterpieces in the language. Rather it is because the subconscious problems it resolves for the adult reader are not the problems of the child.

Conversely, in the case of books such as those in the Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys series, we would have a means of understanding why large numbers of our students, even those who are neither willfully perverse nor lacking in literary discrimination, like something we do not.

In both series, the young heroes or heroines are consistently competent, self-reliant, and respected by peers and by parents and all other adults. They are not only strikingly able, but they constantly outdo their own parents at their parents' own professions. Such heroes and heroines do not fare well in standard literary inquiry, for not only do they lack any plausible relationship to real life, but they are drawn in the most transparent and artless ways. Many children and adolescents, however, once they become aware of the existence of these books or others like them, will read them voraciously.

The reason for this is not far. One of the main struggles of the the older child or young adolescent involves the development of his self-image as an individual, and one of his deepest desires is to excel, indeed to be perfect. The heroes and heroines in the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys stories are the very embodiment of every young person's perfection fantasy, and through the process of identification, the young person can satisfy the desire to be perfect, avoiding and repressing the pain he feels in not being so. With the relief thus provided, the young person's exhausted ego is given a respite from its struggles in the real world, much akin to the respite that sleep provides from a day's labors, and

as sleep prepares one for the following day, so does the respite provided by these stories prepare the young person for a re-encounter with the real world once the stories are over.

The stories also present their characters with Manichean polarity. Mr. Drew, for example, is an encapsulation of all that is good, and Carl Schaum, a car thief, escaped convict, liar, and drunk, all that is evil. By the measures of any standard method of literary inquiry, such characterization, expecially since no allegory is intended, is deemed a failure in craft. There is no ambiguity or embeddedness about the actions or motivations of these characters, and this reduces sharply their attractiveness and acceptableness as fictive creations.

For the young reader, however, these characters have profound significance. At one time or another, most young people are thwarted in their efforts at developing a positive self-concept and at achieving personal independence. It is generally too threatening for them, however, to give recognition to, and certainly unacceptable to give vent to, the frustration, anger, and hatred of themselves and their parents and teachers that this situation engenders. But there is little emotional conflict involved in hating a Carl Schaum. By projecting their feelings onto a totally evil character such as Schaum, young people can achieve symbolic gratification of personally threatening and socially unacceptable urges, thereby freeing themselves to deal with the real objects of their frustration and anger in less charged ways. Through the mechanism of projection, the child rids himself of his anti-social impulses on a subconscious level and enters an emotional state more conducive to insight and growth. Importantly, it is the baldness of the characterization in the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys stories that makes the characters so accessible to the identification and projection activities which initiate the invaluable projection-catharsis-insight process.

Clearly, if we were to put aside such abstract criteria as adequate theme, lively plot, memorable characters, and distinctive style, and restore reader response as a major determining factor in the worth of a literary work, we would be in a much better position than we usually are for matching our students with books. We would be sure more often that the putting of books before children or adolescents did not put them in their way. If our concern were to be with the book and the reader, we would find that it is not the quality of the book alone, but the quality of the experience with the book that becomes important. We would see literature for children or adolescents not in terms or culture and literary appreciation, good books or bad, more books or fewer, but rather as the means by which our students could achieve an ever continuing fulfilling of their own needs and desires.

Developing a method of literary inquiry based on developmental and psychoanalytic psychological knowledge will not be an easy task, nor is it likely that our reassessing of the way we view what our students choose to read or of the way we work with what they have read will come without pain. The world of affect has generally been outside the province that American psychologists have established for themselves, and it has long been clear that the sense of a unified psychology is generally alien to them. Freud did not spring up in Phoenix, nor Piaget in Peoria, and American psychology has usually been characterized by a singularly cognitive, reductionist thrust, with the result that American educators have proceeded in their work with considerable suspicion of man's inner life and little understanding of the totality of his psychological make up.

But even in the face of such odds our responsibility is none the less. All of us whose concern is literature for children or adolescents--teachers, librarians, reviewers, parents, college instructors, teachers-in-training, publishers, and so on--will have to become more conversant with developmental and psychoanalytic

psychologies than we are at the present time, and we will have to use our resultant new awarenesses to inform our behavior as we work with our students and books. Educating ourselves about such matters, moreover, should be seen in the same light as our educating ourselves about any new conceptualization related to our work, and since the field of literature for children and adolescents is not exactly one where new conceptualizations burst upon us daily, the new books themselves aside, the task of educating ourselves should not be insurmountable.

Notes

[1]Alan Purves, "Indoctrination in Literature," English Journal, 63:5 (May 1974), p. 69. For the full report, see Purves, Literature Education in Ten Countries (New York: Halsted Press, 1973).

[2]Simon O. Lesser, Fiction and the Unconscious (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), pp. 20-58.

[3]Purves, "Indoctrination in Literature," p. 68.

[4]E. E. Cummings, "Since Feeling is First," Poems: 1923-1954 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1954), pp. 208-209.

[5]D. W. Harding, "Response to Literature: Report of the Study Group," Response to Literature, ed. James Squire (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968), p. 25.

[6]May Hill Arbuthnot and Zena Sutherland, Children and Books, 4th ed. (New York: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1972), p. 227.